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AUTHOR Hauck, Philomena
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ABSTRACT

An English instructor examined 9 Judy Blume adolescent novels and interviewed 12 students (grades 6, 7, and 8) who had read the novels to look at the world as it was presented in the books and to compare the instructor's own perceptions with those of the adolescent readers. The study revealed that the books did in fact dwell on the problems of adolescence, but some of the more complicated problems such as drugs and alcohol were generally excluded. Although the teacher's analysis of the books seemed to show that the problems were dealt with fairly superficially, the young readers were still consoled to know that other people had the same problems they had. The Judy Blume world was affluent, contemporary, and middle-class, one where only the fathers worked outside the home. Parents played a minimal role in the books, and schools were negatively portrayed, consisting of boring classes and unimaginative teachers. Blume readers felt that the homes in the novels were more affluent and attractive than their own and thought the parent characters were too permissive. Judy Blume novels afforded little opportunity for the reader to confront ethical or moral issues. In general, the characters were remarkable for their individualism (defined as looking out for number one), and a by-product of this self-preoccupation is an extreme competitiveness which, while pervasive, does not preclude peer conformity. The books did provide readers with insights into themselves and, less frequently, into the behavior of others. Readers also said that the light, humorous tone of the books, their use of first person narrative, and their easy, readable style enhanced their popularity. (HTH)

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Judy Blume and Beyond
Philomena Hauck

The junior novel is a relative newcomer on the literary and educational scene. Known variously as "adolescent novels", "teenage novels" or "young adult novels", these books written specifically for young and middle adolescents between 10 and 16 years old began appearing sporadically in the mid-thirties. Generally saccharine and didactic as they then were, they were seldom taken seriously by reviewers.

With the appearance of Seventeenth Summer in 1942, the junior novel began to take on greater depth and maturity. In the same year, the Saturday Review of Literature initiated reviews of books for teenagers and four years later the Booklist began to give separate coverage to books for the adolescent. The first in-depth critical article on the subject appeared in the English Journal in September, 1951.

Since then the number of junior novels has burgeoned and they range in quality from those with much literary merit to those that are stereotyped in plot, devoid of characterization and dull in language.

Good or bad, these novels are immensely popular with young people. Several experts say that without such books, many young people might never bridge the gap between children's literature and adult novels.

In this field, Judy Blume is a phenomenon. Several of her novels have been on the best seller lists and have sold about 8 million copies. According to booksellers and librarians she is

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The one author most asked for by young people. A 16 mm film about the author and her work has recently appeared on the market. Blume's books fall into the category of realistic "problem" novels i.e., they deal with problems that belong specifically to young people in today's world. These novels have a propensity to teach and are read chiefly for developmental purposes.

In dealing with these books, teachers and librarians are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand we want young people to read and to enjoy reading. On the other hand, we are concerned about the values contained in reading materials such as these. As most people agree, the author of a novel holds certain basic assumptions about life and the adolescent readers are forming judgments, reactions, values and beliefs from their reading.

That is why I felt it was important to look at the Blume novels. Because of her immense popularity with young people, we cannot afford to ignore her. We have to be familiar with what young people actually read before we can guide them in their reading. But it is not enough for us to look at the books through our own eyes. It is also important to try to find out what the young readers themselves see in them.

About a year and a half ago I studied the nine junior novels by Judy Blume that were then in print. I also interviewed 12 students (four each from grades 6, 7 and 8,) all of whom had read the nine novels. My purpose was to look closely at the world as it is presented in the books and to compare my perception with the perceptions of the readers for whom the books were written. I also wanted to know why

the books were so popular because this information would be helpful in reading guidance.

Since the novels purport to deal with the problems of the young adolescent, I first reviewed the available literature about young people in this age group to determine what their concerns really are. All the studies suggested that these young people are very egocentric, particularly concerned with their physical development and appearance and very much influenced by their peer group.

My own study of the Blume novels revealed that the books did dwell on the problems of the young adolescent. In all of the nine novels studied the main characters are faced to some extent with physical or physiological problems or personal fears of some kind and in many cases they have conflicts because of relationships. However, some other problems that young people have such as those related to drugs and alcohol were generally excluded.

All the members of the study group emphatically agreed that the problems dealt with in the Blume books are those faced by themselves or their friends. "Judy Blume really knows what we worry about," or "She must have children of her own," were common remarks. Indeed when asked why they enjoyed reading her books, every single person made some mention about the way the author knew what kids that age really worry about.

Although my analysis of the books seemed to show that the problems were dealt with fairly superficially, the young readers reacted differently. They were consoled to know that other people had the

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same problems as they (sometimes secretly) had. With the optimism of youth, they also believed that it was realistic to assume that most of the problems in books and in life were eventually solved or at least dwindled in significance as the time went by. If we can generalize from the interviews, it seems to be true, as most experts suggest, that young people do read in a personal or therapeutic way. This is not to say that they will not read about characters who are different from themselves or that they should not be encouraged to choose books which deal in greater depth with the problems of adolescents. It merely acknowledges the fact that books about adolescent concerns have a powerful attraction for young people.

The condition and behaviour of fictional characters have intended and unintended influences on readers. The environment or what is sometimes loosely called the setting may contain important though unintended messages. Novels such as those by Judy Blume have only enough setting to make the story come alive. Nevertheless, although these settings do not impinge on the main action of the story, the reader will to some extent absorb the norms and mores of the fictional world. We can compare this with television where the mere fact that a young white middle class world of fun, violence, and excitement prevails encourages young people to begin to believe that this world is the norm.

The Judy Blume world is affluent contemporary middle class cocoon where fathers are generally engaged in professional or managerial work and mothers do not work outside the home. Ripples of the women's

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liberation movement do touch the surface of the Blume world in two later books where the mothers actually have professional careers.

On the whole, parents play a minimal role in the books. Kept in their place as breadwinners and keepers of the household, they conveniently vacate the stage for their voluble and, at times, critical children. Unhampered by many restrictions or parental authoritarianism, the young people devote their time to their own pursuits. In themselves, these pursuits are mainly incidental to the opportunities they provide for discussions about parents, boys, peers and teenage preoccupations generally. The world of work or school is largely ignored except in Blubber where a large part of the action takes place there. On the whole, schools are negatively portrayed with boring classes and uncaring or unimaginative teachers.

Replies to questions about the Blume environment revealed that the young people saw the home to be more affluent and attractive than their own. They thought the parents were more permissive and they envied the characters their freedom from work or responsibility. Some of the members of the group thought that parents were too permissive and that kids had too much freedom. Nevertheless, on the whole it seemed that the books may provide a pleasant escape into a fantasy world where the young have greater power and prestige than they have in real life. Obviously, like many adults young people enjoy escapist fiction. We teachers and librarians must be aware of this natural tendency and not be critical or censorious. On the other hand, in our reading guidance we can try to counterbalance this tendency and to gently guide young people to more solid fare.

Although literature is not a branch of psychology or sociology, most good writers throw some light on the essential issues of human existence. Childrens and adolescent literature is particularly concerned with human values, although good books are never consciously didactic. Since it is commonly agreed that the reading of literature is one way through which people cultivate ideals and values it is important for teachers and librarians to know whether the books popular with these young readers do in fact meet these criteria.

The Judy Blume novels afford little opportunity for the reader to confront ethical or moral issues. In general the characters in the novels are remarkable for their individualism (defined as looking out for number one.) Self-absorbed and preoccupied with their own feelings and affairs, the outward world touches them only insofar as it impinges on their personal preoccupations. Beyond ordinary camaraderie and everyday good fellowship the young people show very little empathy for different points of view.

A by product of this self-preoccupation is an extreme competitiveness which is pervasive throughout the whole books. This competitiveness does not preclude conformity to the peer group. Through it is acceptable to be more accomplished or more popular than your friends, you must not be too different or eccentric. A positive aspect of Blume's emphasis on individualism is the implication that most young people do make some tentative moves towards maturity and acceptance of responsibility. The endings are beginnings for the

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characters and the feeling is conveyed, even if simplistically, that the adolescent has survived the crisis and will cope better with the future.

Most of the young characters in the Blume novels show a lively interest in sexual matters and in the novel Forever, premarital intercourse is taken for granted. The message is clear. Sex is a normal everyday experience about which young people should feel not guilt but a sense of responsibility so that diseases and unwanted pregnancies are avoided.

The subject of religion does come up in one book. Are You There, God? It's Me Margaret. This could have provided an opportunity to explore the possible significance of religion in the heroine's life. Instead, the issue is confined to some chats with God and a few visits to churches, where Margaret is more interested in the hats than the service.

When the subject of racial prejudice comes up in Iggie's House it is similarly trivialized. The reader is not strongly involved with the characters who are like puppets dragged in to fight the racial battle for the author. Readers are told about the subject. They do not experience it.

When opportunities arise to deal with compassion or empathy, the readers' emotions are not actively engaged. In one story, Deenie, the main character is portrayed as having some sympathy for a hunchback, but the whole scene shows the old lady as dehumanized and lacking in dignity.

As to the young readers themselves, what values did they get from the books? Above everything else they gained a certain reassurance from the fact that other people had the same problems as they had. Beyond this simple identification with characters, the readers appeared to gain certain insights into their own behaviour and less frequently into the behaviour of others. "The books teach you about yourself," or words to that effect were commonly expressed opinions.

The dilemma faced and at least partially overcome by the fictional adolescents also inspired a certain optimism in the young readers. The feeling seemed to be that if fictional adolescents could survive and mature, so also could their real life counterparts. In a few cases the books did arouse empathy for other people and their predicaments.

From remarks made about the style of the books and from specific illustrations to which young readers alluded, it was obvious that the light humorous tone of the books greatly enhanced their appeal. One of the reasons often cited for recommending the books to friends was that they too would enjoy the funny parts.

Another reason for their popularity was their easy readable style. Poor readers were especially appreciated this feature. One girl who said she hardly ever read a book through because her brain didn't work when she was reading enjoyed all of them because she could follow the story.

The first person narrator technique was also a reason for the

books' popularity. Several of the young people said they felt that they were just listening to a friend and participating in the plot.

To sum up - let's take a final look at the Blume world which so many young readers have visited through the medium of the printed page? Why has this particular Pied Piper cast her spell on young adolescents. Should teachers and librarians worry or rejoice? What are the implications for reading guidance?

To a considerable degree, the Blume world resembles that of the urban middle class adolescent. More affluent and workfree, however, it is a world dominated by young people with little or no interference from parents or other authority figures.

It is a cocoon from which the poor, the ethnically different, and outside events are largely excluded. Because of this narrow range of human experience opened up for observation, the books may promote conformity rather than providing perspective. If, as is commonly believed, the reading of literature is valuable for the vicarious experience it provides, the Blume books will not appreciably enlarge young people's horizons.

For young adolescents, overwhelmed by physiological changes, striving for independence from adults, highly dependent on peer opinion and still uncertain about their own roles, the books offer the consolation that other young people are faced with similar problems. As the interviews showed, young people tended to identify with fictional characters in similar situations, their tensions were

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somewhat relieved, they gained some insights into their own situation and (very occasionally) they learned some empathy for others. On the other hand, the competitiveness and self absorption of the main characters may intensify the egocentrism which marks the young adolescent.

Unlike great literature, the Blume books deal only marginally with ethical or moral issues. This is not to say that we expect a novelist to expound any ethical or moral code. A serious novelist, however, will examine and illuminate moral issues and in so doing will leave the reader with something on which to ponder. As the young reader moves on from these books, the knowledgeable teacher or librarian will have to guide them into more mature and probing literature.

We can also see from the interviews that part of the reason for the books' popularity was their humorous and undemanding first person narrative. Young adolescents like a good uncomplicated story. If they cannot make their way rather easily through a book they may cast it aside and turn to other forms of entertainment. It is well to be aware of this fact - because if we try to thrust overly-mature classics on young readers we may do more harm than good.

For those who have condemned the Blume books for their controversial subject matter (and in some cases have succeeded in having them banned from school libraries) the results of the student interviews have important implications. It appears that the subjects dealt with in the books were of particular concern to the young

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readers. Regrettable though it may be, today's young teenagers are more precocious than their earlier counterparts. Bombarded as they are by the mass media, they cannot be kept isolated from surrounding reality. As studies have shown, student reading peaks around twelve years of age. If the books that young people enjoy are not readily available to them, they may turn away from voluntary reading.

Instead of ignoring the books or being ultra-critical of them, teachers and librarians will have to adopt a different stance. They should become thoroughly familiar with the Blume books (and others like them) which are very popular with young people. Then they can talk to young people about them and gradually lead their young charges to become more critical and perceptive. By knowing what kinds of books are popular with young people, they can take them from where they are to other similar books which will bring greater insight and satisfaction. A list of recommended titles with some of the features of the Blume books, but more likely to broaden and deepen the literary experience is provided.

NOVELS TO GROW BY

- Bawden, Nina. Carrie's War. Lippincott, 1973.
- _____. The Peppermint Pig. Lippincott, 1975.
- Chaney, Jill. Half a Candle. Dobson, 1968.
- _____. Mottram Park. Dobson, 1970.
- Childress, Alice. A Hero Ain't Nothing But a Sandwich.
Coward, McCann, 1973.
- Cleaver, Vera and Bill. Where the Lilies Bloom. Lippincott,
1969.
- Cormier, Robert. The Chocolate War. Pantheon Books, 1974.
- _____. I am The Cheese. Pantheon Books, 1977.
- Cunningham, Julia. Dorp Dead. Pantheon Books, 1965.
- Duncan, Lois. Killing Mr. Griffin. Little Brown, 1978.
- Fitzhugh, Louise. Harriet the Spy. Harper & Row, 1964.
- _____. The Long Secret. Harper & Row, 1965.
- Fox, Paula. How Many Miles to Babylon? Macmillan, 1968.
- _____. The Slave Dancer. Bradbury, 1972.
- Greene, Bette. Summer of My German Soldier. Dial, 1973.
- Guest, Judith. Ordinary People. Viking, 1976.
- Hamilton, Virginia. M.C. Higgins, the Great. Macmillan,
1974.
- Kerr, M.E. Is That You, Miss Blue? Harper & Row, 1975.

Konigsburg, E.L. From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler. Atheneum, 1967.

_____. (George). Atheneum, 1971.

Lee, Harper. To Kill a Mockingbird. Popular Library, 1962.

LeGuin, Ursula. Very Far Away From Anywhere Else.
Atheneum, 1976.

Paterson, Katherine. Bridge to Terabithia. Crowell, 1977.

Potok, Chaim. The Chosen. Simon and Shuster, 1967.

Swarthout, Glenda. Bless the Beasts and Children. Double-
day, 1970.

Walsh, Jill Paton. Unleaving. Macmillan, 1976.

Wrightson, Patricia. I Own the Racecourse. Harcourt Brace,
1970.